

Book review: Land Tenure and Security

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Book review

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Ege, Svein (ed.) (2019), *Land Tenure and Security*. State-Peasant Relations in the Amhara Highlands, Ethiopia, Martlesham, Suffolk: James Currey, ISBN 978-1847012241 (hardback), 207 pages

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) government, which came to power in 1991, is known for its Agricultural Development Led Industrialization (ADLI) strategy based on state landownership – an authoritarian, top-down approach that guarantees usufruct rights to individual peasants but also restricts their personal freedom and has led to donor dependence. In recent times, conflicts over landownership in various parts of the country – including the Amhara Region – have led to unrest and a change of government in 2018. Ethnic unrest, meanwhile, has caused the displacement of about two million people.

The book does not deal with the recent violent conflict but is dedicated rather to the highland peasants of the Amhara Region; its aim is a critical assessment of peasant land tenure with a view from below, based on the decade-long field research and a specific focus on land rights and inequalities. Ethiopia's history is marked by conflicts and conquests, and the Amhara have been regarded as “conquerors” ever since Emperor Menelik II's violent land acquisitions in the late nineteenth century. However, as Svein Ege points out, the “Amhara Paradox” is often neglected: the conquerors themselves were “dirt poor” (6), which means that the daily troubles of Amhara peasants – who were repeatedly affected by famines – are often overlooked. Ege, as a historian, takes a retrospective look at Ethiopian revolutions and reforms, as well as their effects on Amhara peasants – starting from 1974, when the Därg (military council) overthrew Haile Selassie and implemented a land reform programme under the motto “land to the tiller.” Tenants received conditional ownership rights, and the size of their holdings was supposed to be equalised, a process not ultimately finalised due to administrative shortcomings. Peasants' rights vis-à-vis the state were insufficient, and their customary land could be appropriated for projects of collectivisation, afforestation, and villagisation. When the EPRDF coalition came to power, it essentially kept the Därg's land distribution system intact. The principle of state landownership was enshrined in the 1995 constitution, with no guarantees of tenure security. In the Amhara Region, only one single official land redistribution campaign took place in 1997, with peasants receiving land certificates to ensure their usufruct rights. Ege's book aspires to narrowing the existing research gap



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related to “the land tenure system [as] seen from a peasant’s perspective” (20), given the fact that most existing studies are survey-based and to point out some shortcomings of the current system.

The book has nine chapters: six of which are authored by Ege himself (including one co-authored with Yigremew Adal), two by Harald Aspen, and the final one a postface by Kjell Havnevik. Chapter 1 is the introduction; chapter 2 presents a critical review of the literature on peasant land tenure in Ethiopia – which, as noted, is mainly based on surveys, not on ethnographic fieldwork. Ege presents different bodies of literature, focusing on resource conservation, the tendency towards microfarms, the role of oxen in land tenure, and the market approach. Chapters 3 to 7 are based on longitudinal field research in specific localities in the Amhara Region, while chapter 8 is a critical assessment of today’s land tenure system and chapter 9 the conclusion.

Chapter 3 describes a specific landownership system called *dersha* (entitlement of each person to a share of land), which according to Ege has produced a remarkably equal society. It also presents a critique of the predominant perceptions of land redistribution based on the author’s findings in the Ayn commune in Northern Shoa. This location has witnessed frequent land redistributions, but not in the sense of a comprehensive transfer of land parcels from rich households to the poor. Chapter 4, the one co-authored by the editor and Adal, describes land tenure in Gojam under the Därg. Fieldwork showed that while seven rounds of land reallocation had taken place, only two were major ones. Chapter 5 deals with land tenure in Baba Sää in North Wälo and highlights some peculiarities of the EPRDF’s land reform – such as the distinction between house-near and distant land, the introduction of different fertility classes, and the discrimination against large households.

Chapter 6, by Aspen, examines the relationship between land and wealth in Mäqét, North Wälo – a traditionally poor and famine-ridden area – and finds a clear correlation between household size and wealth. In chapter 7, Aspen describes transformations in the market town of Arbit since the end of the Ethiopian–Eritrean war in the year 2000, identifying specifically a process of accelerating modernisation. He observes a shift in the EPRDF’s approach to development: from completely opposing urbanisation, which was supposed to make poor peasants sell their land and become even worse off, it had become slightly more supportive thereof by 2010.

In chapter 8, Ege discusses the instability of the current land tenure system. He argues that Ethiopia’s image has shifted from being a famine-stricken location to a country with spectacular economic growth. However, this does not mean that the land question has been settled; there are still contradictions between state landownership and private land tenure. He suggests that there should be a limited right for local farmers to buy and sell land and that, contrary to the government’s fear, there will be no mass land sales by impoverished peasants. The government applies a paternalistic approach and does not regard peasants as competent actors, but instead it should engage in dialogue with them.

In the conclusion, Aspen summarises how the Därg and EPRDF have reformed the feudal land system so as to improve peasants’ rights and avoid famine. Some Därg policies were highly destructive, while those of the EPRDF are contested. He emphasises the political dimension of land legislation: the land issue figured prominently in the early

1990s until it was "settled" by the 1995 constitution. It came up again around the 2005 elections when political space opened up, and lost momentum when the government became afterwards more authoritarian. In 2015, unrest spread "largely due to the authoritarian approach of the development state in dealing with peasant land rights" (157) – which led to a new government in 2018 that promised an inclusive land policy.

The book is the result of the longitudinal observation of land tenure systems in different localities of Ethiopia's Amhara Region and provides valuable insight into the particularities of tenure and various post-1974 land reforms. However, although it stresses the importance of peasants' agency, Ege's reform proposals also come across as a top-down suggestion. It is questionable, further, whether his reform proposals would be applicable to Ethiopia as a whole, where pastoralism, agro-pastoralism, and other forms of extensive land cultivation – all of them challenged by the increasing commercialisation of agriculture and by land grabbing – complement sedentary, plough-based agriculture. Aspen's argument that the land question has played an important role in Ethiopia's long history of conflict cannot be overestimated. Therefore, looking at the land problem through the lens of tenure systems in one particular region provides us with useful insights but, as the authors rightly stress, more qualitative research regarding the agency of peasants – and furthermore that of pastoralists, who lack secure access to pasture land even more acutely – is necessary. Hopefully, the current reform path under Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed will have a positive impact on the government's benevolent but often patronising attitude towards the tillers of Ethiopia's land.

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